

THE IRON RIVER

A ROCKY MOUNTAIN ROMANCE
OF A FIGHTING RAILROAD MAN

By FRANK L. PACKARD

CHAPTER I.
Bad Blood.

RIGHT-LIPPED, his jaw muscles twitching angrily, Larry Lannigan swung up from his desk and, walking to the office window, stood staring out at the railroad yards below.

"If I had a temper like yours," observed Mason, the division paymaster, offensively, as he tilted back his swivel chair and tucked his thumbs superciliously into the armholes of his vest, "I'd crawl up to the top of the water tank out there, tie a stone around my neck, and drop in."

The young assistant paymaster at the window made no response. Mason shifted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other, narrowed his small, roving, black eyes and made another thrust, baited with a short, jarring laugh.

"And to look at you innocent, childlike countenance one wouldn't think butter would melt in your mouth!"

"No response from the window."

"So you hung some more scalps to your belt last night, eh?" went on Mason, with an aggravating drawl. "Walked right into Silver Dew like a real bad man and laid a couple of the boys out cold, eh? I suppose you'll get away with it, you always do. You generally find a story good enough to make you a candidate for a hero's halo! How does it work out this time?"

The massive shoulders at the window seemed to square back with a sudden jerk and, flat clenched, all muscle, every inch of the six feet of him, Larry Lannigan whirled like a flash to the desk. It was a fine face for all the passion that was in it now, frank and open and genuine for all the steady light in the gray eyes, for all the square, clamped jaw, for all the angry flush that burned upon his cheeks.

"But it out!" he said hoarsely. "I've stood for six months of this, and I've had enough! You don't care what happened last night, even if it were any of your business, which it isn't—it's anything for a chance to hand me one. Now cut it out!"

Mason, suave, oily, shrugged his shoulders in mock despair.

"There you are, you see," he deplored unctuously. "Off the handle again. Why don't you learn to control yourself? I'm only talking to you for your own good—giving you a little advice."

"Are you?" Larry laughed bitterly, as he eyed the other.

Mason's eyes, like those of an up-lifted saint, sought the ceiling.

"Secret," he murmured. "You've got an enviable record, haven't you? You've tried about every department of railroading—and moved on to the next for brawling and fighting in the one before. All that's saved you is that they call you a good railroad man, but that isn't going to save you forever. Your temper! And you—some day when you're all decorated with an end of a rope for murder, you'll wonder, 'What's the matter with me?'"

"Yes," said Larry in a queer, low way. "I've thought of it, and that's why I'm telling you now to cut it out. I don't ask your advice, and I don't want it. I may be under your orders while I'm in this department, but there's a limit to how far you can go. Back East you may have got away with it—out here in the Rockies you can't! Do you get me? You've come here a new man and you've got the idea, because you've taken a dislike to me, that the easiest way to get rid of me is to get me to start something that'll put me in wrong with the super. Larry's lips thinned ominously. "Look out, you don't succeed—too well! That's all!"

Mason flung out his arms speculatively in an injured gesture.

"It's always the way," he murmured, the smile back on his face again. "Always the way. Try to give any one advice for his own good and you're sure to be misunderstood!"

The flush on Larry's cheeks deepened, and one clenched fist came up, though to reach out across the desk and strike the other—then the fist unclenched, the red ebbed from his cheeks and, his face white, he drew back.

"I've got three minutes to catch No. 17," he said heavily. "Where's the payroll?" And as Mason, swinging around in his chair, pulled open the door of the safe and took out a leather bag, Larry reached for it without a word and started to leave the room—half way across the floor, the door slammed.

"We only about thirty poor, innocent, peaceable foreigners who're going, which may appeal to you as a valid excuse for beating them up," said the paymaster, who had come suddenly occupied with the papers on his desk and did not lift his eyes. "But I advise you not to, though—much as you dislike advice. Well, because that's the last bit of trouble for once in your life!"

For an instant Larry stood there motionless, the red sweeping into his face again—and then, swinging on his heel, he went out of the office, and another instant, his face twitching with passion outside the closed door, then went down the stairs, out on to the platform, and flung himself into a seat in the forward smoker of the train.

It was only one more of Mason's "baitings" that had been going on now for the last six months—no more—that was all.

"It's those dreams," muttered Larry to himself as the train pulled out, "or there'd have been a showdown long ago. But, dreams or no dreams, he'll make one crack too many one of these days, and then Jim Mason and I will meet head on."

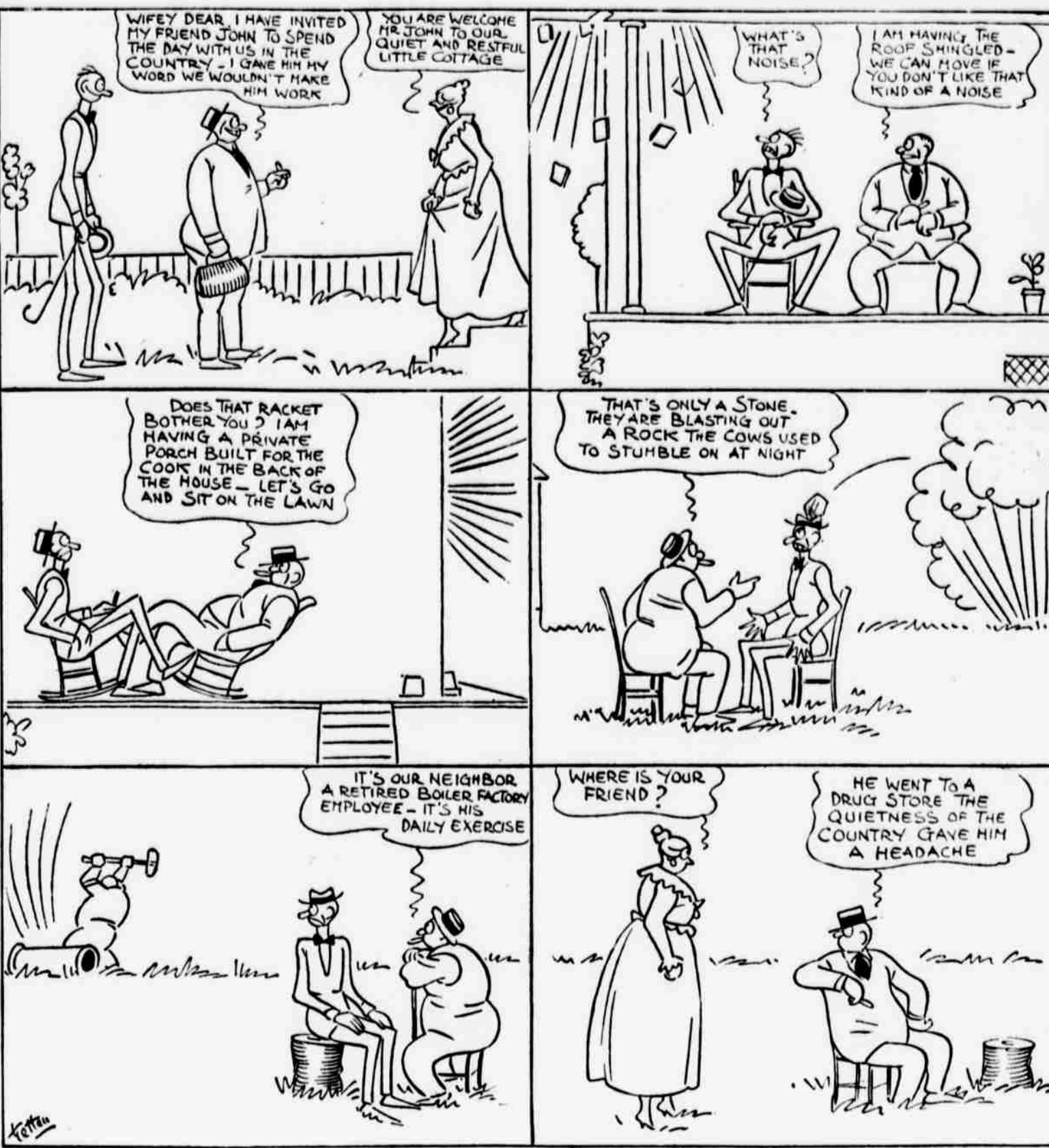
Larry frowned a little anxiously as he looked on the northpice of his train. None knew better than he the seriousness of his besetting fault.

At first, in the earlier days of his career, those outbreaks of his had frightened him, but solely for the reason that he had been told that he loved no other thing on earth, and he feared a dismissal so sweeping that it would embrace the mountain division in its entirety, as it would have done save for the fact that, when still a call boy of fourteen, he had, unknown to any one, picked up the "key" in the dispatcher's office at Angel, the division headquarters, and kept it, without a soul within call, for years, until he came, when Jasper Halley, the dispatcher on the night track, and out in the mountains of the West for his health, and about a jack-knife and collapsed under the table in a dead faint. And the "big fellows" had remembered it. But as he had grown older, however, those outbreaks of his had become a sense of fear—the possibility that he might do some one serious injury some day—the possibility, in his mind, that with the tremendous physical strength with which nature had endowed him, he might, on one of those occasions when he was "seeing red," kill a man. This, however, had never assumed a vivid realism, as it never

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By Maurice Ketten



countered an unusual sight—the presence of some one else besides the station agent. "Who's the kid?"

"Belongs to the gang," Hill answered. "He came down to have a request for supplies wired in. You're in that much luck anyhow. He can carry your bag for you. He's going back now."

"I always carry this bag myself," Larry said, looking at the boy. "But I'll be glad of his company. His son, come here!" he called, and then, as a small, bright-faced Italian boy of fourteen or fifteen, answered the summons: "What's your name?"

"Tommaso Inghelbordo!" responded the boy.

"Tommaso! I like you," Larry said, smiling. "I'll be glad of your company. His son, come here!" he called, and then, as a small, bright-faced Italian boy of fourteen or fifteen, answered the summons: "What's your name?"

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ing modest about the percentage. You said Masseno stole your money. How did he do that?"

"He took my envelope. He said I got my board, that's all."

"How'd you get in with Masseno in the first place?" Larry asked.

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shoved the amount into Tommaso's hand—and Tommaso thrust it through the open door of the shanty. Then like a flash he whirled upon the padrone. "Here's your pay, you yellow pup!" he cried, between his teeth, and flung the envelope on the table. "Your game's up, my bucko! You can talk to the company behind the bars for stuffing the payroll, but you'll still talk to me now for stealing the cop's pers from that little kid! You damned skunk!" he roared—and his fist crashed into the padrone's face. There was a scream, and a rush from Masseno, that was lost in a burst of oaths, yells and shrieks from the mob behind—a rush—and they were on Larry like a cyclone, and flinging themselves upon him before he could reach the door, bore him to the ground by sheer weight of numbers, and closed upon him, a writhing, snarling mass.

CHAPTER IV.
Larry Pays His Score.

RIGHT in the mountains in the fall comes early, and it was already fairly dusk when, after reaching Angel and seeing the young Italian boy in hospital, where he learned to his relief that Tommaso's injuries were not serious, Larry retraced his steps down the main street of the little mountain town which housed the division headquarters, and reaching the railroad station, entered and made his way upstairs, heading for the paymaster's office that he shared with Mason.

He pushed the door open and entered the room. The oil lamp in the bracket on the wall already lighted. Loyal, the trainmaster, and Max Glynn, one of the dispatchers, were lounging in chairs, their feet up on the window sill. Mason was placid, some packages of banknotes in the safe.

"It was Mason who spoke. "Hello!" he drawled ironically. "So you're back, eh? I heard you'd gone up to the hospital for repairs. Loyal and Max Glynn, who were lounging in chairs, their feet up on the window sill. Mason was placid, some packages of banknotes in the safe."

"Nothing to say for yourself, eh? Well, I don't wonder!" continued Mason, affecting a sharp, caustic official tone for the benefit of his visitors. "You've given a little too far this time, my man! You're a little over my head. The super wants to see you in the morning."

Larry made no reply. It was still fairly dark when, as the paper kept dancing before his eyes, and he had to keep reading over the sentences he was writing to make sense.

"I dare say you'd rather taken with yourself over it at that!" resumed Mason, his thumbs seeking their accustomed resting place in the armholes of his vest. "Single-handed, Larry, you've taken on a lot of thirty men—or something like that, eh? That's very nice! Marvellous! But we've had a full report from Beaver Dam and what about the company's property?"

What about the fire loss—the shanty and the bunk house that the fire spread to and that the crew of the work train mistook for a shanty? That's some heroes, all right!"

The pen handle snapped like a toothpick in Larry's fingers.

"You call yourself a railroad man?" snorted Mason. "You're a damn nuisance! I can't understand it—he turned ingratiatingly to the trainmaster and Max Glynn: "how you fellows out here have stood for it as long as you have? What? I thought the wild and woolly band of the West was only kept now in cages at Coney Island and places like that!"

From the railroad shops over across the yards and tracks the six engines roared and rumbled, and the locomotives seemed out rascally. Loyal heaved up from his chair, followed by the dispatcher.

"I ain't butting in on this, Mason," said Larry, a little gruffly. "When you're talking about the fire loss, out here—I dunno! I like it pretty good out here myself—or I wouldn't stay. As for Larry there, him and me ain't had no trouble so far, and maybe he's got to tell you he's a super. I ain't butting in. And, anyway, there's the whistle gone."

The two men crossed the room, threw a "good night" at Larry, and passed his desk, and went out of the office.

Larry did not answer them, did not hear them—he was watching Mason now with his eyes narrowed, and with a disdainful grin, Mason took his hat from its peg on the wall, put it on, stepped to his desk, slammed down the ruler, reached up to the door of the safe—and then Larry spoke.

"Wait!" he said hoarsely. "You're not going home yet? I want a few minutes with you, Mason."

Mason turned and scowled.

"You can say anything you've got to say to the super—in the morning," he said, looking at a watch.

"I said," said Larry in a sort of deadly quiet, "that I wanted a few minutes with you. With his hand on the knob of his desk, Larry deliberately crossed to the door, turned the key in the lock, and slipped the key into his pocket."

"What do you mean by that?" he blustered. "Put that key back in the lock at once—and open that door!"

For answer, Larry stopped quickly toward the desk, laid the letter on the top of Mason's desk, and then Larry spoke.

"There's my resignation!" — his hand getting out of control now. "It's not going home yet, and now you've got it. And now, you dirty dog, you're going to get something else that you've been asking for!"

Mason's face grew as green as a dollar, and he edged back until he bumped against the wall.

"What do you mean?" he said again, and with his lips nervously quivering with a passion that was rocking him to the soul, Larry followed step for step, bay.

(To Be Continued)